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Venus in Two Acts

One cannot ask, “Who is Venus?” because it would be impossible to answer such a question. There are hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances and these circumstances have generated few stories. And the stories that exist are not about them, but rather about the violence, excess, mendacity, and reason that seized hold of their lives, transformed them into commodities and corpses, and identified them with names tossed-off as insults and crass jokes. The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body, an inventory of property, a medical treatise on gonorrhea, a few lines about a whore’s life, an asterisk in the grand narrative of history. Given this, “it is doubtless impossible to ever grasp [these lives] again in themselves, as they might have been ‘in a free state.’”

Out of the World and Back

But I want to say more than this. I want to do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive. I want to tell a story about two girls capable of retrieving what remains dormant—the purchase or claim of their lives on the present—without committing further violence in my own act of narration. It is a story predicated upon impossibility—listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives—and intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved.

If I could have conjured up more than a name in an indictment, if I could have imagined Venus speaking in her own voice, if I could have detailed the small memories banished from the ledger, then it might have been possible for me to represent the friendship that could have blossomed between two frightened and lonely girls. Shipmates. Then Venus could have beheld her dying friend, whispered comfort in her ear, rocked her with promises, soothed her with “soon, soon” and wished for her a good return.

Picture them: The relics of two girls, one cradling the other, plundered innocents; a sailor caught sight of them and later said they were friends. Two world-less girls found a country in each other’s arms. Beside the defeat and the terror, there would be this too: the glimpse of beauty, the instant of possibility.

The loss of stories sharpens the hunger for them. So it is tempting to fill in the gaps and to provide closure where there is none. To create a space for mourning where it is prohibited. To fabricate a witness to a death not much noticed.

In a free state, it would have been possible for the girls to attend to the death of a friend and shed tears for the loss, but a slave ship made no allowance for grief and when detected the instruments of torture were employed to eradicate it. But the consolation of this vision—a life recognized and mourned in the embrace of two girls—was at odds with the annihilating violence of the slave ship and with virtually everything I had ever written.

And how does one tell impossible stories? Stories about girls bearing names that de-face and disfigure, about *the words exchanged* between shipmates that never acquired any standing in the law and that failed to be recorded in the archive, about the appeals, prayers and secrets never uttered because no one was there to receive them? The *furtive communication* that might have passed between two girls, but which no one among the crew observed or reported affirms what we already know to be true: The archive is inseparable from the play of power that murdered Venus and her shipmate and exonerated the captain. And this knowledge brings us no closer to an understanding of the lives of two captive girls or the violence

that destroyed them and named the ruin: Venus. Nor can it explain why at this late date we still want to write stories about them.

Is it possible to exceed or negotiate the constitutive limits of the archive? **By advancing a series of speculative arguments and exploiting the capacities of the subjunctive (a grammatical mood that expresses doubts, wishes, and possibilities),** in fashioning a narrative, which is based upon archival research, and by that I mean a critical reading of the archive that mimes the figurative dimensions of history, I intended both to tell an impossible story and to amplify the impossibility of its telling. The conditional temporality of “what could have been,” according to Lisa Lowe, “symbolizes aptly the space of a different kind of thinking, a space of productive attention to the scene of loss, a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science and the matters absent, entangled and unavailable by its methods.”³⁴

The intention here isn’t anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible. This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the impossibility of representing the lives of the captives precisely through the process of narration.

The method guiding this writing practice is best described as critical fabulation. “Fabula” denotes the basic elements of story, the building blocks of the narrative. A fabula, according to Mieke Bal, is “a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused and experienced by actors. An event is a transition from one state to another. Actors are agents that perform actions. (They are not necessarily human.) To act is to cause or experience and event.”³⁵

By playing with and rearranging the basic elements of the story, by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done. By throwing into crisis “what happened when” and by exploiting the “transparency of sources” as fictions of history, I wanted to make visible the production of disposable lives (in the Atlantic slave trade and, as well, in the discipline of history), to describe “the resistance of the object,”³⁶ if only by first imagining it, and to listen for the mutters and oaths and cries of the commodity.

By flattening the levels of narrative discourse and confusing narrator and speakers, I hoped to illuminate the contested character of history, narrative, event, and fact, to topple the hierarchy of discourse, and to engulf authorized speech in the clash of voices. The outcome of this method is a “recombinant narrative,” which “loops the strands” of incommensurate accounts and which weaves present, past, and future in retelling the girl’s story and in narrating the time of slavery as our present.³⁷

Narrative restraint, the refusal to fill in the gaps and provide closure, is a requirement of this method, as is the imperative to respect black noise—the shrieks, the moans, the non-sense, and the opacity, which are always in excess of legibility and of the law and which hint at and embody aspirations that are wildly utopian, derelict to capitalism, and antithetical to its attendant discourse of Man.³⁸

The intent of this practice is not to give voice to the slave, but rather to imagine what cannot be verified, a realm of experience which is situated between two zones of death—social and corporeal death—and to reckon with the precarious lives which are visible only in the moment of their disappearance. It is an impossible writing which attempts to say that which resists being said (since dead girls are unable to speak). It is a history of an unrecoverable past; it is a narrative of what might have been or could have been; it is a history written with and against the archive.